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Résumé de l'article

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Counselling Loss as a New Variable in the Education Production Function

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate counselling loss as a new variable in the education production function as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated social and emotional impact on students. Study participants unanimously reported a sizable counselling loss and a 30 percent average decrease in time spent in direct counselling service provision during the COVID-19 pandemic; at the same time, students' counselling needs increased. Participants identified three salient categories of impact from counselling loss associated with the pandemic, including emotional manifestations, social manifestations, and students' growth and development-related opportunity loss.

Résumé

L'objectif de cette étude qualitative était d'examiner la perte de counseling en tant que nouvelle variable dans la provision de l'éducation suivant la pandémie de COVID-19 ainsi que l'impact social et émotionnel associé sur les étudiants. Les participants à l'étude ont unanimement fait état d'une perte importante de services de counseling et d'une diminution moyenne de 30% du temps consacré à la fourniture directe de services de counseling pendant la pandémie de COVID-19; en même temps, les besoins des étudiants en matière de counseling ont augmenté. Les participants ont identifié trois catégories principales d'impact de la perte de counseling

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Keywords / Mots clés: counselling loss, COVID-19 pandemic impact, social emotional counselling / perte de counseling, impact de la pandémie de COVID-19, counseling social et émotionnel

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted all areas of society: family, industry, health, and education. In response, the world is trying to figure out its way forward, despite the new strains of the COVID-19 virus that keep spreading. Federal and state governments in the United States have issued a number of mandates: stay at home (Kassinger, 2021), indoor versus outdoor regulations (Marchiori, 2020), masking (Chan, 2020; Kai et al., 2020), and quarantine regulations (Memon, Qureshi, & Memom, 2021; Parmet & Sinha, 2020). All these mandates have had a direct impact on every element of society, and children are a big part of that equation.

Recent educational research has focused on the COVID-19 impact on students' educational loss (Black et al., 2020; Praghopapati, 2020) and emotional well-being (Buckner et al., 2021; Cao et al., 2020; Elmer et al., 2020) as well as the impact on teachers (Barton, 2020; Kaden, 2020). A recent statement by U.S. Surgeon General Murthy highlighted the negative impact some pandemic policies have had on the mental health of children (Powell, 2022) and that schools need to be prepared to deal with the repercussions.

Researchers and educators alike agree that even a brief school closure with various virtual implementations have resulted in substantial learning losses (Kuhfeld, Soland, Tarasawa, Johnson, Ruzek, & Liu, 2020). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020) highlights that nearly 1.6 billion learners around the world were impacted by COVID-19 school closures. Kaffenberger (2021) states, "A serious concern is that these short-term learning losses could continue to accumulate after children return to school, resulting in large and permanent learning losses as many children who fall behind during school closures never catch up" (para. 1). Many schools and districts are working hard to mitigate those learning losses through curriculum realignment (Keffenberger, 2021), remediation schedules (Alam & Tiwari, 2021), and extended school times (Von Hippel, 2019). However, what is being done to mitigate COVID-19's social and emotional impact on students?

The purpose of this research is to study the social and emotional impact of COVID-19 on students. The focus of the study is utilizing the conceptual framework of the education production function. The pandemic has impacted the world's mental health; so, logic dictates that schools must be prepared to deal with the ramifications. This article aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Building upon the concept of a learning loss, how do school counsellors describe the concept of a counselling loss?
2. How do school counsellors describe the impact of a counselling loss?

Literature review

Erik Hanushek (2020) identifies an educational production function as the relationship between school and student inputs and a measure of school outputs. Understanding this relationship is essential to resource planning and strategic planning. This is true whether the decision of resource allocation is being made based on growth or equality, or some combination thereof. Common school inputs are considered school resources and output is often considered student achievement; however, COVID-19 changed the assumptions of production.

Consider Bowles' (1970) production function formula below:

$A = f(X_{1, \ldots}X_{m,, \ldots} X_{n, \ldots}X_{v,} X_{w \ldots}X_{z})$ where

A = a measure of school output

$X_{1}, \ldots.X_{m}$ = variables that measure the school environment (time on task, resources, etc.)

$X_{n}, \ldots X_{v}$ = variables denote outside influences or environmental influences on learning (parental educational attainment, two-parent family, etc.)

$X_{w}, \ldots X_{z}$ = variables that signify the student's ability and learning obtained prior to entry into the new school environment (p. 13)

When put in the context of school changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, the variables can be defined as follows:

A = student achievement, mental health

$X_{1}, \ldots.X_{m}$ = school calendar days, time in virtual environment, student engagement in virtual environment, availability of digital resources and equipment, internet capabilities, etc.

$X_{n}, \ldots X_{v}$ = COVID-19 school closures, isolation, lack of educational support, differing learning environments, economic struggles, etc.

$X_{w}, \ldots X_{z}$ = losses that occurred as a result of school closures (learning and counselling) as students re-enter a brick-and-mortar school

This change in traditional variable identification makes planning much harder for district and school personnel as well as policy makers. However, schools must work to identify the new variables before they can begin the real work ahead of them.

Learning loss

The term "learning loss" is commonly referred to today to describe declines in student knowledge and skills as compared with previous years (Pier, Hough, Christian, Bookman, Wilkenfeld, & Miller, 2021; Zhao, 2021). This measure of knowledge and skills is traditionally measured longitudinally through local, state, and national testing. This measure of variable A in Bowles' (1970) formula of education production function has made researchers and national policymakers uneasy as the output will certainly impact the variables of input, especially for students from disadvantaged homes (Adem & Barut, 2021; Bassett & Arnhold, 2020; Bol, 2020; Chen, Dorn, Sarakatsannis, & Wiesinger, 2021; Engzell, Frey, & Verhagen, 2021).

Factors that affect learning loss traditionally are considered less time spent on educational activities, less feedback during the learning process, and emotional factors (Angrist, de Barros, Bhula, Chakera, Cummiskey, DeStefano, & Stern, 2021; Zhdanov, Baranova, Udina, Terpugov, Lobanova, & Zakharova, 2022). Because of school closures and some variations of virtual schooling, less time was spent in school. Furthermore, absenteeism can be described as time spent away from the normal school setting; so, remote schooling during COVID-19 is another variable that is considered in learning losses (Santibañez & Guarino, 2021). The ramifications of the learning losses experienced by students have ramifications beyond school, such as the social and economic development of communities (Fernald, Li, & Ochse, 2021; Reuge, Jenkins, Brossard, Soobrayan, Mizunoya, Ackers, Jones, & Taulo, 2021; Santibañez & Guarino, 2021), dropout rates (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, & Viruleg, 2020), and earning potentials (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). Referring back to Bowles' (1970) education production function, policymakers and district leaders will have to consider the new variables in the input variables as well as the short-term expected outcomes. To combat some of the losses, researchers have made multiple suggestions. Kaffenberger (2021) postulates regarding remediation and curriculum realignment:

> Remediation when children return to school reduces the long-term learning loss by half, but still leaves children more than half a year behind where they would have been with no shock. Remediation combined with long-term reorientation of curriculum to align with children's learning levels fully mitigates the long-term learning loss due to the shock and surpasses the learning in the counterfactual of no shock by more than a full year's worth of learning. (para 1)

Other suggestions include extended school years. When looking at summer learning losses, Von Hippel (2019) asserted that extended school years have a positive impact on student learning gains versus losses, particularly in impoverished areas. In fact, extended school years are currently utilized by some of the highest performing schools (Von Hippel, 2019), while others argue that the benefits are negligible (Furrer, Magnuson, & Suggs, 2012). However, extended day options are also examined as possible alternatives to closing the gap (Kraft & Falken, 2021).

Counselling loss

The term "counselling loss" is not found in literature; however, the term aptly describes the loss of services during the COVID-19 pandemic. School closures removed a tier of mental health support during a time of social isolation and loneliness due to quarantine orders and school closings (Thakur, 2020; Viner et al., 2022). In addition to school closures and the loss of socialization among school-aged peers, some family dynamics also changed as a result of COVID-19. Isolation from peers was not the only isolation experienced. Children also felt isolated from extended family members, and some even experienced deaths in the family due to the virus (Fitzgerald, Nunn, & Isaacs, 2021).

In addition to the stressors of the virus, many family members experienced the loss of income during the pandemic as well as increased family violence during quar-

antine (Figueiredo, Sandre, Portugal, Mázala-de-Oliveira, da Silva Chagas, Raony, & Bomfim, 2021; Fitzgerald et al., 2021). With reduced access to mental health and support services from schools, students may experience harmful effects for some time (Marques de Miranda, da Silva Athanasio, Sena Oliveira, & Simoes-e-Silva, 2020; Tsamakis, Tsiptsios, Ouranidis, Mueller, Schizas, Terniotis, & Rizos, 2021). As a result of the pandemic, school-aged children now face more mental health challenges than ever before (Benton et al., 2022; Chadi, Ryan, & Geoffroy, 2022).

For communities of colour, the mental health issue is exacerbated with higher rates of declining income, higher rates of infection, and limited access to medical care (Esterwood & Saeed, 2020; CDC, 2020; Sue & Sue, 2016). Some students have reported food insecurity, unreliable internet for schooling, and uncertain housing conditions (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Research shows that a direct correlation exists between school absenteeism and mental health issues (Lawrence, Dawson, Houghton, Goodsell, & Sawyer, 2019), and the importance of mental health services in schools have never been as necessary to youth as they are today (Duong, Bruns, Lee, Cox, Coifman, Mayworm, & Lyon, 2021). As a result of the totality of COVID-19, more students today are experiencing anxiety and depression (Courtney, Watson, Battaglia, Mulsant, & Szatmari, 2020; Fry-Bowers, 2020; Racine, McArthur, Cooke, Eirich, Zhu, & Madigan, 2021).

In the context of Bowles' (1970) education production function, external variables, such as absenteeism from the normal school setting, access to the internet, economic struggles, lack of educational support, grief, and lack of counselling services, contribute to the variable A output of a school. To combat the losses felt in the mental health domain, school officials and policymakers will have to find ways to mitigate the negative effects or children will forever feel the loss. Schools can be part of the solution by changing some of the input variables in the equation:

1. Implementing a rigorous multi-tiered system of support (Irimie & Sandu, 2021; Kearney & Childs, 2021; Rosanbalm, 2021).

2. Allowing school counsellors the time to identify students in need (Irimie & Sandu, 2021; Kurland, 2021).

3. Teaching coping mechanisms through individual and group counselling sessions (Najarro, 2021; Savitz-Romer, Rowan-Kenyon, Nicola, Alexander, & Carroll, 2021).

4. Increasing the number of mental health professionals in schools or at least access to these professionals (Lenares-Solomon, Bown, & Czerepak, 2019).

5. Providing academic support for those who have fallen behind (Minkos & Gelbar, 2021; Sullivan, Miller, McKevett, Muldrew, Hansen-Burke, & Weeks, 2020).

6. Referring students to outside agencies if more intense support is needed (Lenares-Solomon et al., 2019; Shah, Mann, Singh, Bangar, & Kulkarni, 2020).

Methodology

Numerous research designs have been utilized to investigate learning loss resulting from the transition to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. However,

research studies have not focused on the concept of counselling loss from the COVID-19-related lockdowns, isolation, and transition to virtual instruction. The complexity of the concept of counselling loss, transition to virtual counselling, as well as the myriad of challenges associated with counselling in a virtual environment, necessitate a thoughtful construction of the research design (Leavy, 2017). For these reasons, this study employs a general interpretivist research design, including qualitative structured interviews to gain in-depth insight about school counsellors' perceptions of counselling loss during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A general interpretivist design was utilized in this research study because the research questions focused on school counsellors' perceptions of the concept of counselling loss and the impact of counselling loss. Leavy (2017) asserts that utilizing qualitative strategies with structured interviews is particularly powerful in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of participants' perceptions, which was integral to this study. This research strategy enabled individual school counsellors' rich personal reflections on their own experiences to be compared with other participants in the study (Creswell, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 2015; Leavy, 2017).

The interviews utilized five structured questions that aligned to one of the study's two overarching research questions and utilized an open-ended question structure to encourage research participants to elaborate on their own perceptions about the concept of counselling loss. The interview questions focused on three important areas including the percentage of time school counsellors spent providing direct counselling services before the COVID-19 pandemic, percentage of time counsellors spent on direct counselling services as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and perceptions about the counselling loss concept. Open-ended interview questions that were informed by research literature and aligned with one of the study's two overarching research questions ensured the interview questions were relevant and appropriate (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). Each interview was recorded and transcribed to increase data trustworthiness (Creswell, 2018). The research interviews were conducted utilizing video conferencing software spanning a two-week period.

Research participants

 School counsellors in a southeastern state in the United States were invited to share their perspective in individual research interviews. Invitations to participate in the research study were emailed to all school counsellors in the state. Eleven school counsellors agreed to participate in the study. Participants were employed by different schools and districts and geographically dispersed throughout the state. Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015) assert that even a small research sample may provide great insight and information on the research topic. To meet the inclusion criteria for the research study, participants must be employed as a school counsellor who transitioned to virtual counselling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants in this study were diverse in years of school counselling experience, school counselling grade level, gender, and race and ethnicity, increasing the likelihood of the representativeness of the sample. Additionally, the interview participants geographically spanned the state. Interview participant pseudonyms and demographics are provided in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article for the research participants.

Table 1. Participant demographic characteristics

Pseudonym	School counselling experience	Gender	Race
Brenda	10 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
Amy	20 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
Blake	15 Years, High School	Male	Caucasian
Emily	22 Years, High School	Female	African American
Hanna	17 Years, High School	Female	African American
Sabrina	28 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
Sofia	1 Year, High School	Female	African American
Sally	25 Years, Elementary School	Female	Caucasian
Sam	8 Years, Middle School	Male	Caucasian
Scott	2 Years, High School	Male	African American
Wendy	20 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian

Data analysis

Creswell (2018) states, "The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data" (p. 183). Following the conclusion of the first research interview, the researchers utilized a thematic, constant-comparison analysis (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Using a thematic analytic strategy, the researchers engaged in multiple stages of coding, clustering, and classifying words to ensure saturation was reached and to gain insight about developing themes, categories, and patterns associated with school counsellors' perceptions about counselling loss (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This inductive analysis led to three themes emerging from the data that answered the study's overarching research questions and provided insight about the concept of counselling loss. Previous research literature on learning loss assisted in better understanding and recognizing emerging themes, categories, and patterns in the study's data and helped in contextualizing the research findings.

Qualitative methods seek to enhance rigour by minimizing researcher bias, increasing data accuracy, and communicating the credibility of the research findings (Johnson, Adkins, & Chauvin, 2020). The evaluation of research rigour includes multiple important considerations, including the credibility, confirmability, and dependability of the process. This study employed several strategies to help increase credibility and guard against researcher bias, including using an interview protocol that employed the same questions for each participant, recording interviews, and transcribing participant interview responses. The study enhanced confirmability by using a published conceptual framework from the research literature and using ongoing reflection. The researchers helped ensure dependability by transparent communication of the study's research methods, participant characteristics, recruiting methods, analysis techniques. The research employs foundational principles of qualitative research, including research participant interview responses in direct quota-

tions as well as contextual data to enhance readers' ability to assess the rigour of the study (Johnson et al., 2020).

Results

School counsellors participating in this study answered a variety of interview questions designed to generate insight about the following two overarching research questions: 1) building upon the concept of a learning loss, how do school counsellors describe the concept of a counselling loss? and 2) how do school counsellors describe the impact of a counselling loss? Research participant responses were strikingly similar despite differences in years of experience, gender, race, and ethnicity.

Identifying the concept of counselling loss

All (100%) the participants interviewed in this research study strongly agreed there was a counselling loss resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, when asked about the concept of counselling loss, Amy, a high school counsellor with over 20 years of experience, responded, "Absolutely. And it's more than that. It's more than a counselling loss. It's that the pandemic caused so many more issues to bubble to the surface. So, there's the loss and the need for new services." Sally, an experienced elementary school counsellor with over 25 years of experience, shared, "Students are trying to remember how to do school again. We've had to really work hard to catch them up with counselling and help them navigate."

School counsellors also shared that counselling loss exerted a more pronounced impact on some students more than others, particularly low-income, at-risk student populations. This belief is illustrated by Emily, a high school counsellor with 22 years of experience, who confided:

> Yes. Those students who need the push, I feel like those were the ones who we might have lost during the pandemic or who lost counselling services, because we could not always reach those students like we needed to. Those were the hard students to reach. Those were the students who were either staying with their grandmother or auntie or were working and not doing well in school. And we would constantly reach out the parent, but sometimes it's hard to get parents over the phone. So, I would say that for the at-risk population, there was definitely a loss.

Similarly, Sam, a middle school counsellor with over eight years of experience, highlighted the counselling loss experienced by at-risk students:

> Especially with our low-income students, yes. And unfortunately, school counsellors often serve as the mental health resource for those families. And I think that a lot of those families had so many other stressors during the time of COVID that reaching out to their school counsellor via online and especially for parents, I don't think they realized that we were still a resource for them during their time. So, I would definitely say, yeah, there was a pretty big counselling loss during that time.

Measures of counselling loss

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends school counsellors devote at least 80 percent of their time in direct counselling services to students (ASCA, 2019). Research study participants were asked to share the percentage of their time dedicated to providing direct counselling services before the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the percentage of their time allocated to direct counselling services resulting from the pandemic. An analysis of participant responses demonstrates a large decrease in percentage of time spent in provision of direct counselling services during the COVID-19 pandemic as depicted in Table 2. Nine out of 11 of the research participants (82%) reported a significant decrease in direct counselling service time. In fact, the percentage of school counsellors' time providing direct services averaged 75 percent pre-pandemic and decreased to 45 percent during the pandemic. This represents a 30 percent decrease in direct service provision at a time when students' counselling needs were increasing.

Table 2. Percentage of time allocated to direct counselling services

Pseudonym	School counselling experience	Percentage of time pre-COVID-19 (%)	Percentage of time during COVID-19 (%)
Brenda	10 Years, High School	80	60
Amy	20 Years, High School	85	60
Blake	15 Years, High School	90	50
Emily	22 Years, High School	80	80
Hanna	17 Years, High School	80	80
Sabrina	28 Years, High School	60	25
Sofia	1 Year, High School	50	25
Sally	25 Years, Elementary School	85	25
Sam	8 Years, Middle School	80	15
Scott	2 Years, High School	70	35
Wendy	20 Years, High School	65	45

Impact of COVID-19 and counsleling loss on students

An analysis of the participant interview data indicates that counselling loss associated with the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on students. The school counsellors interviewed in this study passionately described how the pandemic and counselling loss impacted their own students. School counsellors identified three salient categories of impact, including emotional manifestations, social manifestations, and the opportunity loss for students' growth and development.

Emotional manifestations

School counsellors described a myriad of emotional manifestations impacting students from the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated counselling loss. These emotional manifestations included students' feelings of loss, fear, and anger. For example, Amy, a high school counsellor with over 20 years of experience, reflected on students' sense of loss:

> There's an increase of just a basic, apathetic, almost even negative outlook because you can't plan anything. We may have a graduation this year, we may not. There may be a prom, maybe not. You can't set any goals, any milestones.

Similarly, Hanna, a high school counsellor with 17 years of experience, asserted:

> Isolation, anxiety, loneliness, just a feeling of loss of how to reconnect with teachers, reconnect with peers. COVID made a lot of the students fearful of being back in a crowded place.

Scott, a second-year high school counsellor, commented:

> Emotionally, I think that they're a little bit more fragile. I think there's a lot more stress. Emotionally, everybody's on edge, especially at the beginning of the school year, when they had to come back and be around different groups of people. They didn't have that opportunity last year, especially with our ninth graders, who basically hadn't had school since seventh grade. So, we've seen that transition be emotionally difficult for them.

School counsellors also described students' feelings of anger associated with their experience. For example, Sabrina, a veteran high school counsellor with over 28 years of experience, confided:

> My students are angry that they have been forced to do this as long as they have, and they've had no say in it. They're not concerned as much about the learning loss, but they're angry that they haven't had a say, and that they're afraid that at any given time, we're going to go back into virtual. Just the uncertainty of it all.

Social manifestations

School counsellors also passionately detailed the social manifestations impacting students from the COVID-19 pandemic and associated counselling loss. Social manifestations included students' increased feelings of anxiety and depression, challenges communicating with civility, and decreases in conflict resolution skills. For example, Amy, a high school counsellor with over 20 years of experience, shared, "There's an increase in anxiety and depression in our students." Similarly, Wendy, an experienced high school counsellor with over 20 years of experience, confided:

> We have so many more kids that are identified with anxiety or saying they have anxiety and panic attacks because they're hearing this on the news that that's what's going on with these kids because of COVID. They're inundated with that constantly, that they have social, emotional learning needs. Their needs are not being met.

Likewise, Sabrina, a veteran high school counsellor with over 28 years of experience, asserted, "I see a lot more insecurities. I see a lot more comparing oneself to another person." Sofia, a first-year high school counsellor, commented:

> A lot of students are battling anxiety. It's just all over them because COVID has placed that fear in us. Kids really need the one-on-one

> counselling with the counsellor or outside. Kids just don't know how to communicate. They don't want to communicate. They're just trying to cope with it in their own way, I guess.

Research participants also highlighted the challenges in coping with stressors and communicating with civility. For example, Scott, a second-year high school counsellor, commented:

> They have difficulty coping, dealing with any type of negative influence, or dealing with any type of stressors. They're just coping skills are not where they were two years ago. I see the difference in the social aspect of the students.

Similarly, Hanna, a high school counsellor with 17 years of experience, shared:

> Even just trying to communicate and respect each other's opinions became issues, and I think will be issues. And students are strong and vocal these days, a good bit of them. So, they want to be heard.

The difficulty in communicating with civility also transitioned into decreased conflict resolution skills. For example, Sabrina, a veteran high school counsellor with over 28 years of experience, shared:

> There are more fights than there was before. Because apparently, when everybody was at home, people talked smack behind their computer, but then when you get face to face and they're mouthing off, and it's resulting in fights. So, it's been a turbulent start for most high schools.

Additionally, Sam, a middle school counsellor with over eight years of experience, stated:

> There is a lot of emphasis on getting students back up to speed about what are acceptable prosocial behaviours. When students have been without their people, their resources for two years, a lot of times they've forgotten how to interact with other adults. When your bubble is your family at home, the only adults that they interacted with were their parents or guardians. And sometimes those relationships weren't the most positive. So, they learned or unlearned certain skills of how to deal with stress, how to deal with conflict, how to deal with talking with adults. So, what I've seen is a lot of re-teaching how to respect one another, how to have healthy conflict resolution. There's a lot of behavioural maladaptation that's occurred in the last couple years.

Scott, a second-year high school counsellor, commented:

> We've seen a lot of uptick in violence as well, or people not being able to resolve conflicts as well as they used to. Like I said, more violence.

Opportunity loss for growth and development

School counsellors also described the opportunity loss for growth and development resulting from the loss of counselling services and counselling curricula during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Amy, a high school counsellor with over 20 years of experience, shared:

Our students missed the appropriate counselling programs, so those students miss those tier one interventions that they would have received. So now we're a year later. So, do you go back and grab those interventions, or do you just jump ahead? That's where I think we're getting the things that have bubbled up because of the pandemic, and they've bubbled up quicker because they didn't have the core counselling curriculum they would've had if they had been in school with a school counsellor.

Emily, a high school counsellor with 22 years of experience, confided:

Yes. There are some students that definitely needed to be checked in on more. For example, now that we're back in the building, I have a student who has to take virtual science education classes so he can be a senior in the spring. And as often as I can, I try to get him in my office to check in at lunch every day. I couldn't do that really when we were at home with this pandemic.

Similarly, Blake, a high school counsellor with 15 years of experience, reinforced the present challenge:

What we're seeing now with the mental illness and all that kind of stuff, it exhausts so much of your time that you feel you're missing someone. You know you're missing someone. I feel like we're playing catch up. So, I do think there was a loss, and I think that because we're playing catch-up and we're seeing so many students because they're in serious need. And the result is you're neglecting so many other kids.

Discussion

There is increasing research on students' learning losses associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to virtual instruction. However, a parallel discussion of counselling loss and the associated impacts has been absent from the research. Findings from this research demonstrate the concept of counselling loss is real and exerts a profound impact on students' social and emotional skills as well as their growth and development.

Viewing counselling loss through the lens of Bowles' (1970) education production function illustrates that powerful structural and systemic changes must be made to transform the variables influencing the output we are seeing in today's educational environments. Changing these variables necessitates taking steps to catch students up from the counselling loss as well as address students' current and future needs through the provision of robust and highly effective counselling services.

Every school counsellor participating in this study passionately described their students' counselling losses during the pandemic. Counsellors' discussions of the associated emotional manifestations, social manifestations, and the opportunity loss for students' growth and development provides helpful insights about the interventions needed to change the variables in the education production function. Given the scope of counselling loss and wide range of student needs, educational leaders will likely benefit from triangulating the following strategies to mitigate and effectively address the impacts of counselling loss.

1. Invest in additional school counsellors who are dedicated to helping students recover from pandemic-related counselling losses. The addition of additional staff will not only help address counselling losses and students' social and emotional counselling needs, but it will also preserve existing school counsellor resources to effectively implement the entire ASCA model and enable critical time investments in fostering college and career readiness. Research participants not only highlighted the need to help students recover from counselling loss, but also the need for new services to address social and emotional manifestations resulting from the pandemic. Investing in new school counsellor positions is critical in meeting the need for expanded and new services.

2. Meaningfully reduce school counsellor-to-student case load sizes to support the time-intensive work required to address the counselling loss and students' social and emotional learning needs that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Study participants described students as being more fragile, with increased anxiety and depression. School counsellors expressed needing additional time to help students with feelings of loss, fear, and anger resulting from the pandemic.

3. Remove non-counselling related job duties from school counsellors, consistent with the ASCA model, to increase the percentage of time counsellors are providing direct services to students. Adherence to the ASCA model's recommendations on the percentage of time school counsellors are engaged in direct services also provides a pathway for gaining additional counselling time to meet students' increased mental health needs resulting from the pandemic.

4. Invest in continuing professional development and learning opportunities to build capacity in social and emotional school counselling best practices. Study participants reported struggling with trying to catch up from counselling loss and opportunity loss during the pandemic. Engagement in professional development may provide a meaningful way of learning about and sharing best practices for delivering the missed counselling curricula.

5. Recognize that social and emotional school counselling can be intense and emotionally draining for counsellors. Invest in self-care, self-reflection, and renewal activities and support resources for the school counselling team. Given the expansion of student needs and the need for additional services, investments in support resources for school counsellors is critical.

6. *Study limitations and future research recommendations*

While this study found strong consistency in school counsellors' beliefs about counselling losses associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on students, an analysis of the study's methodology indicates several potential limitations and recommendations for future research. The study was conducted within one southeastern state using a general interpretivist approach, which may limit the extent to which the results can be generalized. The use of qualitative research methods also exerts inherent weaknesses stemming from the design, including the possibility of biased responses due to the data being filtered through the participants' perceptions. Research participants may differ in their analytical reflection skills as well as their ability to articulate perceptions. While procedures including using an interview protocol,

recording, and transcription can help enhance data trustworthiness, the underlying data is still based upon individual perceptions. Future research studies incorporating multiple states, a larger and more diverse sample of school counsellors, and different methodological techniques may improve the generalizability of the findings.

Conclusion

In addition to the focus on COVID-19 related learning losses, it is imperative to also examine the impacts of counselling loss. Findings from this research study indicate counselling loss exerted a profound detrimental impact on students' social and emotional skills as well as lost opportunities for growth and development. Given the scope of the counselling loss impact and wide range of social and emotional manifestations, educational leaders must triangulate a myriad of intervention strategies to effectively meet students' counselling needs. Study findings suggest these intervention strategies must include expanding school counselling capacity to address the need for new services and expanded student social and emotional health needs.

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